

The Pros and Cons of Probiotics

Foods fortified with probiotics and probiotic supplements deliver live bacteria that can help with digestive health. But while the list of potential benefits of probiotics is growing, there are still questions about their effectiveness.

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When you go to the grocery store nowadays, you'll likely see a number of items containing [probiotics](#), so-called friendly microorganisms that are most commonly bacteria and sometimes a type of yeast.

And thanks to their health hype you can now find everything from probiotic yogurt, chocolate, and granola bars to probiotic supplements and powders.

Though probiotics might seem like the latest health trend, they are not new, says [Susan Lucak, MD](#), a gastroenterologist in New York City and a special lecturer at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. "Probiotics have been consumed by humans in one form or another for more than 100 years," Dr. Lucak says.

Today the two most common types of probiotics found on the market are species of good bacteria called *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*. While their manufacturers claim that probiotics have a number of overall and [digestive health](#) benefits, the jury is still out on who should take them.

The Many Possible Benefits of Probiotics

Some of the research examining probiotic benefits has found that:

Probiotics might help reduce blood pressure. According to a study published in *Hypertension*, a [journal of the American Heart Association](#), in 2014, the reduction was greatest in people whose blood pressure was already elevated.

Probiotics show promise in preventing [colorectal cancers](#). That's according to a study published in [BMC Surgery](#) in 2012.

Probiotics might help in the prevention and treatment of cavities, periodontal diseases, halitosis, and other oral

diseases. However, writing in [Quintessence International](#) in 2015, researchers said more study is needed.

Some research has also examined the link between bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract and other health issues:

An overgrowth of one kind of bacteria in the intestines may play a role in the development of [rheumatoid arthritis](#), according to a study [published in eLife Digest](#) in 2013.

A study of mice, published in the [journal Cell](#) in 2013, suggests a connection between the gut and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, at this point, researchers don't know whether the findings might apply to humans and whether an effective probiotic therapy for ASD could be developed.

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Probiotics: Who Shouldn't Take Them?

Some people find that taking probiotics causes them to have gas, bloating, and abdominal discomfort. For most people, these symptoms are temporary; however, side effects are more likely in those who are very young or elderly and those who have less robust immune systems or a damaged immune system, such as those with [HIV](#) or a terminal illness. Indeed, probiotics might not be good for people who are already extremely ill.

A general concern is that probiotics are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Lucak says. Instead, they are classified as a food supplement, so consumers are at the mercy of manufacturers and their health claims.

Keep in mind that the effects of one strain of probiotics do not necessarily hold true for other strains or even for different preparations of the same species or strain. If you do experience gas and bloating from one type of probiotic, you can try switching to a different kind to see whether it agrees more with your digestive system.

“Because the quality and quantity of probiotics is not regulated by the FDA, it is difficult to accurately assess the effectiveness of one formulation against another,” Lucak says.

Expert Tips for Choosing Probiotics

Probiotics come in two forms: live cultures — such as in probiotic yogurt — or in a dormant (but still living) form, such as those found in capsules. If you want to try probiotics, here are tips to help you choose.

Decide on food or supplements. One advantage to probiotics in food is that they may also contain other beneficial ingredients, such as [dietary fiber](#), which also promotes digestive health. But most experts agree that it's a matter of preference whether you consume probiotics in your diet or as supplements.

Watch the expiration date. Because probiotics are living organisms, the amount placed in the container or capsule when it was manufactured may not be the same as when you consume the product. You must use these products before the expiration date to be sure the probiotic is still effective.

Play detective. If your doctor recommends a specific species and strain of probiotic, be aware that you may have a difficult time finding it. Many manufacturers don't tell you exactly which strain is in their product; they only list the species (e.g. *Lactobacillus acidophilus* or *Bifidobacterium lactis*). If you're looking for a specific strain of probiotic and it's not listed on the label, call the manufacturer and ask. This information might also be on the company's website.

Buyer beware. To avoid being scammed, don't order products over the Internet unless you know and can trust the site. Keep in mind that the price of probiotics can vary tremendously, and a higher cost doesn't mean the products are of higher quality.

If you decide to try probiotics, make sure you store them according to the directions on the package; some must be kept in the refrigerator.

Talk with your doctor before adding foods containing probiotics or probiotic supplements to your diet. Some probiotics can interfere with other medications. Your doctor can help you determine whether probiotics are right for you based on your age, health, and medical history.

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